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SUBJECT: GHANA: SURVEY RESPONSE ON CHILD MARRIAGE

REF: SECSTATE 36341

1. This message is post's response to reftel, which requested information about the prevalence and adverse effects of child marriage in Ghana.

#### Legal Age of Marriage

2. Under Ghana's Children's Act, the legal age required to marry is 18 for both girls and boys. There is no lower legal age for marriage permitted with parental consent. However, many births and marriages are not registered, which often makes it difficult to enforce the law. The ages of brides often cannot be proven. Moreover, the vast majority of Ghanaian couples form and celebrate their unions through traditional rites. They then live together, recognized as married couples within their communities without any legal recognition. Because these unions are not registered, they are not easily captured in statistics and it is difficult for the government to intervene to prevent child marriage in these cases.

#### Scope of Child Marriage Problem

3. Child marriage is a problem in Ghana, but its magnitude is unknown as no reliable statistics exist to measure its overall prevalence or its concentration among various ethnic groups. According to Ghana's Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, no government entity currently tracks the statistical incidence of child marriage in Ghana. UNICEF's website ([www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)) cites statistics gathered between 1998 and 2003 to report that 25 percent of children in Ghana were subject to child marriages, with a higher incidence in urban areas. However, the organization's local office disavows these numbers. A UNICEF Ghana official told us these numbers appeared inflated and at odds with the heavier concentration of child marriages in more rural areas noted by UNICEF's own Child Protection Teams. The only organization known to have documented actual cases is the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ)'s Northern Region office, which last year received information about 125 cases of forced marriages, most of which involved girls between 15 and 18 years old.

4. While many child protection experts believe child marriages are concentrated in the rural north of Ghana, some experts indicate the problem is more geographically dispersed. In recent years, UNICEF and CHRAJ officials have witnessed child marriages in seven of the Northern Region's 13 districts, three of the four districts in the Upper East Region, and one of the four districts in the Upper West Region. The Women and Juvenile Unit of the Ghana Police has also received cases in areas of the Brong Ahafo and Ashanti Regions bordering on the Northern Region. Children's Rights International's Kofi Appiah knew of child marriages in coastal districts and districts close to the Volta River and Lake Volta such as the Ada area of the Greater Accra Region, Elmina in the Central Region, and the Yilo Krobo District of the Eastern Region.

5. Poverty, cultural traditions and religious beliefs all contribute to the practice of child marriage in Ghana. In the majority of forced marriages, parents pledge to marry daughters against their will. In some cases, parents may resort to marrying their daughters early to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancies, according to a CHRAJ contact. However, the prevailing motive is economic. International Labor Organization/Ghana officials know of instances in which young men who could not afford dowries simply exchanged younger sisters. Additionally, Children's Rights International points to two circumstances areas in which child labor frequently leads to child marriages. In fishing communities, the young girls who sell fish often elope with the men who employ them. Young girls who serve as domestic help also may find themselves taken as wives by the men they serve.

6. Despite the strong economic motive behind child marriages, culture and religion also are important contributing factors. In the Upper West, young girls commonly elope on market days with their pre-selected mates. In this cultural tradition, men display their bravery by stealing

away the brides without the parents' knowledge. Among the Konkomba ethnic group of the Northern Region, daughter exchanges, pledges of brides at birth and inheritance of a deceased husband's wife are believed to promote social cohesion. Traditional rulers throughout Ghana routinely marry younger wives when they assume the throne (or stool). Cases have been reported in which these rulers have abused this practice to take an underage bride.

17. Child marriages in Ghana threaten gender parity in education and the associated development that takes place in communities when girls are permitted to complete school. Children's rights activists say these marriages also lead to early pregnancies, early terminations and the breakdown of families because these marriages are less likely to endure.

#### USG-Funded Initiatives

18. Post's Democracy and Human Rights Fund (DHRF) funded four workshops this year organized by The Islamic Foundation for Peace and Development (IFPD). IFPD's program educates 300 women and 1,000 students within the various Muslim communities of Greater Accra to promote school attendance and prevent child marriages. It has the support of Ghana's Muslim leadership and aims to influence not only the students, but also Muslim religious leaders who have endorsed child marriages in the past.

19. USAID/Ghana does not have programs which directly address child marriage. USAID/Ghana's education program has an overall goal of improving access to and the quality of primary education in Ghana. This includes a focus on improving educational opportunities for girls in the poor northern region of Ghana. USAID will support scholarships for girls and its implementing partner will be establishing community-managed schools in rural areas with no appropriate schools. The USAID/Ghana Safe Schools program seeks to create a safe environment to reduce gender violence and improve both education and health for school children. While not specifically targeting child marriage, these USAID education programs should have some impact on reducing the incidence of child marriage.

#### Priorities for Future Intervention

10. The Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs and several children's rights organizations say they need baseline data on the prevalence of child marriage and its causes to develop more effective strategies to combat it. Public awareness and grassroots campaigns, particularly in the three Northern regions, may help to educate communities on how child marriage hinders development and to win over traditional leaders. (UNICEF's Child Protection Teams and CHRAJ have carried out grassroots campaigns to educate villagers and traditional rulers about the legal age to marry and to discourage child marriages.) Victim assistance programs would liberate and provide economic assistance to children who have been forced into marriages.

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